

SACRED DAIRIES, DAIRYMEN, AND BUFFALOES OF THE NILGIRI MOUNTAINS IN SOUTH INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Approximately 1,500 Toda people inhabit the Nilgiri Mountains in south India. Arguably the most remarkable characteristic of Toda culture is the sacred nature of the husbandry of herds of long-horned mountain water buffaloes. No other community in India has so single-mindedly focused its ritual attention on one particular animal species. Every important task associated with the buffalo herds – milking, milk-processing, giving salt, naming, seasonal migrations, burning pastures, introducing new equipment into the dairies, etc. – has been embellished with ritual. Todas make a clear-cut distinction between temple and domestic buffaloes. Ordinary men (but not women) herd the latter, whose milk and milk-products (buttermilk, butter, and clarified butter), but not flesh (since the community espouses vegetarianism) may be consumed, bartered, or sold without restriction. Males who are responsible for herding temple buffaloes conduct their daily lives in a manner preserving greater ritual purity than ordinary men. Moreover, they are not just dairymen, but also the community's priests. They must guard the ritual purity of the dairies they serve, and all that is in them, for these are the Todas' temples – sacred places, infused with divinity.

KEYWORDS

Todas, Nilgiri Mountains, pastoralism, water buffaloes, dairy-temples, ritual purity, ritual hierarchy

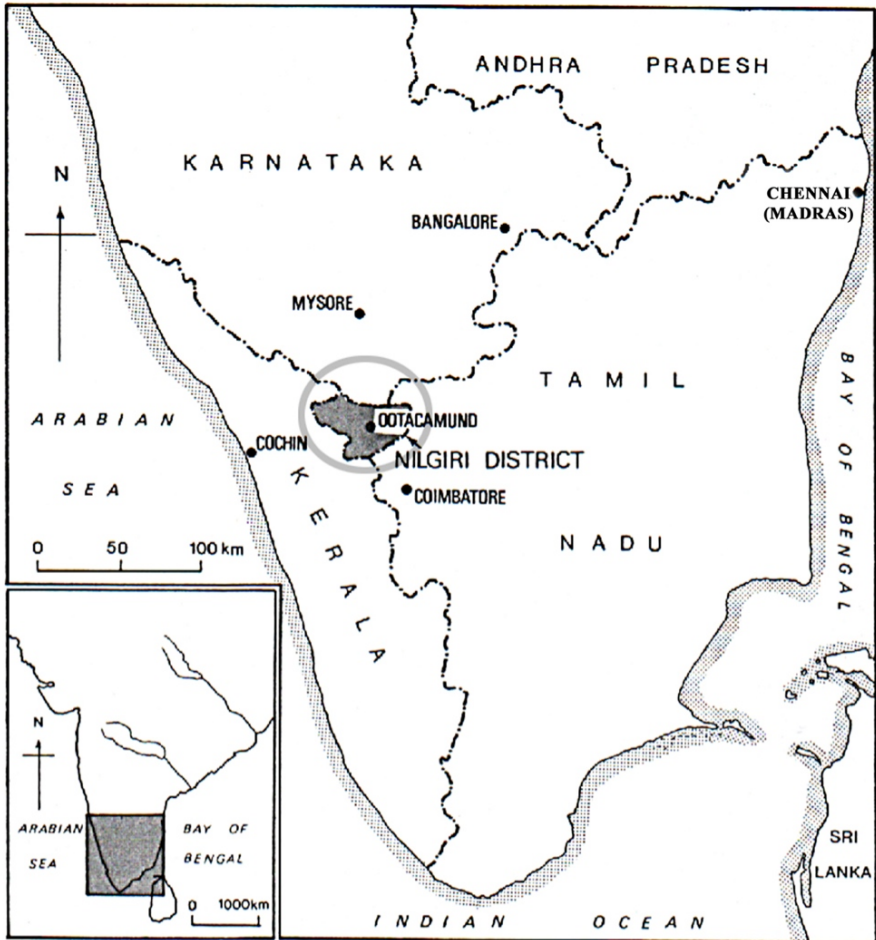
INTRODUCTION

India is renowned as the land of the sacred cow (*Bos indicus*). However, relatively few people are aware of the existence, atop the Nilgiri Mountains in the southeastern state of Tamil Nadu, of a small, traditionally pastoral, community that honors and ritualizes the subcontinent's "other bovine" (Hoffpauir 1982), the water buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*). Indeed, the fervor with which this community extols its buffaloes far exceeds that which the majority of Hindu Indians demonstrate towards their sacred cows.

These people are the Todas,¹ who so elevated the task of herding buffaloes that it became not merely their principal economic strategy, but also their central religious activity. As the late University of California linguist Murray B. Emeneau so succinctly wrote almost three quarters of a century ago (Emeneau 1938:111-12):

The religion of the Todas is a highly ritualized buffalo-cult. Every important operation connected with the buffaloes is conducted according to rule, milking and converting the milk successively into butter and ghee, giving salt to the buffaloes, taking them on migration to fresh pastures, burning over the pastures, giving a buffalo a name when it has calved for the first time, introducing new utensils into the dairy and preparing new coagulant for the milk, rebuilding and re-thatching the dairy, consecrating dairymen, and even drinking buttermilk from the dairy. All the rules apply to the sacred buffaloes; ordinary ones are treated with much less ceremony. Infractions of the rules involve pollution, and most of the precautions surrounding the cult seem designed to prevent pollution of the milk by contact with profane persons or utensils. The milk, as the primary product, is most liable to pollution and the successive operations finally result in ghee, which possesses so little sanctity that it can be sold to outsiders.

¹ The most detailed ethnographic studies of the Todas are those by Rivers (for whom, see Walker 2012e), especially Rivers (1906), Emeneau (for whom, see Hockings 2012c), particularly Emeneau (1967: 224-356, 1971, 1974, and 1984) and Walker (1986). Another, by Ootacamund-based Tarun Chhabra (MS 2012) will be published shortly.



THE NILGIRI DISTRICT, HOMELAND OF THE TODA PEOPLE, IN SOUTH INDIA

FIGURE 1. Location of the Toda homeland, the Nilgiri Mountains in South India, where three modern-day Indian states meet: Tamil Nadu (east), Kerala (south and west), and Karnataka (north). Nilgiris District, the smallest and most northwesterly such administrative unit in Tamil Nadu, covers an area of 2,548 square kilometers. It lies eleven degrees north of the equator at the juncture of the Eastern and Western Ghats. Two thirds of the district comprises a mountain plateau with peaks rising to 2,637 meters. In 2001, the District's population was 764,826 with the Toda constituting just over one percent. Map: ©The author.



FIGURE 2. Toda elder, Matsod of the Melgaash Clan at Pawsh Hamlet in 1963. Photograph: ©The author.



FIGURE 3. Kerodz of the Melgaash Clan at Pawsh Hamlet in 1963.
Photograph: ©The author.

The Toda community – little more than a thousand strong² – has shared the Nilgiri toplands, probably for millennia, with Kotas and Ālu-Kurumbas and, for more than four centuries, also with Badagas.³

Until far into the twentieth century the Todas were primarily a pastoral community, resolutely shunning farming in favor of tending their great herds of mountain water buffaloes over the undulating and, until recently, grass-covered Nilgiri toplands.⁴



FIGURE 4. Wenlock Downs during the monsoon. 'Mashor' is the term Todas use for this seventy-eight square kilometer area of rolling, grass-covered downs at 2,100 to 2,300 meters above sea level. The British named the downs after Lord Wenlock, a one-time Governor of the Madras Presidency. This British era name survives to this day. Photograph: ©The author.

² For a discussion of Toda demographics, see Walker (2012c).

³ The following sources give an overview of these peoples: for Kotas, Basu (1972), Mandelbaum (1938, 1955a, 1955b 1956, 1959), Verghese (1969), and Wolf (1992, 2012a, 2012b); for Badagas, Hockings (1980a, 1980b, 1989, 1999, 2012b, and 2012d); and for Kurumbas, Kapp and Hockings (1989), and Demmer (2012a, 2012b, and 2012c). Demmer writes specifically of the Jēnu Kurumbas, while the Todas have maintained much closer relations with the Ālu Kurumbas, studied by Kapp (1982).

⁴ For the degradation of the Nilgiri grasslands, particularly in the post-Independence period, see Noble (2012b). For details of the Nilgiri grasses, see Chhabra et al. (2002).



FIGURE 5. Particularly since the 1960s, the Government of Tamil Nadu has covered large expanses of grassland with exotic trees, most notably eucalyptus (middle ground of the picture) and acacia. For countless centuries, Todas used such grasslands for pasturing buffaloes. Simultaneously, on both sides of India's Independence, numerous hydro-electric projects have caused rivers to be dammed to form reservoirs (an example in the middle ground, right of picture) that have inundated significant areas of former Toda pasturage. The wooded area in the right background of the photograph comprises indigenous Nilgiri vegetation. Such woodlands, concentrated in shallow depressions, are known locally as *sholas*. Photograph: ©The author.



FIGURE 6. Naricane of the Melgaash Clan poses in front of a herd of Toda buffalo grazing on Wenlock Downs in 1962, in the heart of Toda country. Photograph: ©The author.



FIGURE 7. Pawsh Hamlet of the Melgaash patriclan in 1974, located in the Avalanche area. The hamlet then had four barrel-vaulted domestic houses in traditional style; main buffalo pen (square) and smaller subsidiary pen (round) at right; small front-gabled sheds house buffalo calves at night. To the right is a typical Nilgiri *shola*. The hamlet had recently been connected to the electrical grid, hence poles and pylons. Photograph: Pauline Hetland Walker, ©The author.

These buffalo herders have traditionally occupied exclusively Toda settlements, with their unique domestic and religious architecture.⁵ They speak a language confined to their own community that belongs to the Dravidian family (like those of their neighbors in the mountains and on the plains), but separated from a common Tamil-Malayalam background more than two millennia ago, before Tamil and Malayalam became distinct tongues.⁶ The community subscribes to religious beliefs and ritual practices infused with pan-Indic themes: purity, pollution, hierarchy, caste endogamy, clan exogamy, etc., but which, nonetheless, are uniquely Toda.⁷

⁵ For details see Noble (1966, 2012a)

⁶ For linguistic sources, see Emeneau (1958b and 1984); Emeneau's linguistic successors are S. Sakthivel (1976) and Bhaskararao (2012).

⁷ For confirmation of this statement, see Walker (1986) and compare the sections on Toda religious ideology and practice with other anthropological

Until the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, Todas lived in a hierarchically-ordered, caste-like economic, social, and ritual symbiosis with their close neighbors: the agriculturally-based Badagas and artisan Kotas on the plateau and the swidden farming and gathering-and-hunting Kurumbas and Irulas⁸ of the Nilgiri slopes. They exchanged their dairy products with these people, particularly ghee (clarified butter), for food grains, tools, pottery, jewelry, and forest products, and were bound to them by various ritual and social obligations.⁹ From the late 1820s, the Toda homelands were invaded by outsiders, beginning with British administrators, soldiers, and planters, who were quickly followed by numerous Tamil- and Kannada-speaking castes from the plains to the north and east of the Nilgiris. Outsiders soon outnumbered the autochthones.¹⁰

Venison and wild boar seem once to have been a part of the Todas' diet,¹¹ but for at least the last two centuries the community has espoused vegetarianism, offering this as a prime reason for its superior ranking in the hierarchy of indigenous peoples. Except in one specific ritual context, in which male calves were sacrificed and their flesh eaten,¹² Todas have had no use for their buffaloes' meat. On the occasions of funerals, when they sacrifice buffaloes to accompany their loved ones to the realm of the dead, the carcasses (traditionally presented to hereditary Kota friends in return,

studies of South Indian ideologies, such as Srinivas (1952) or Dumont (1986).

⁸ For an ethnographic survey of the Irulas, see Zvelebil (1988). Toda interaction with the Irulas was traditionally far less intense than with the Kotas, Badagas, and Kurumbas.

⁹ For discussions of inter-community relations among the traditional Nilgiri peoples, see Mandelbaum (1941), Zvelebil (1955), Hockings (1965:20-23, 1980:99-133), and Walker (1986:20-39).

¹⁰ For the impact of British administrative, commercial, and social penetration of the Nilgiris, see Hockings (1989, 2012b), Kennedy (1996), and Kenny (2012).

¹¹ Fenicio (1603); English translation by Alberti (in Rivers 1906:720-30).

¹² Rivers (1906:274-75), Peter (1960), and Walker (1986:179-82, 2008). The last reference contains pencil sketches (based on Rivers's scarcely decipherable photographs) by Pudarno Binchin, Bruneian ethnologist and museum curator.

especially, for funerary music) are sold to Nilgiri butchers who are mostly Muslims.

The principal grain-growers on the mountains, the Badagas, whose pre-seventeenth century origins lie in the Karnataka plains,¹³ from the mid-nineteenth century onwards began cultivating commercial cash-crops: tea,¹⁴ coffee,¹⁵ and cool-weather vegetables.¹⁶ As they did so, they began opting out of their traditional role as food providers to the Todas. From the 1930s, the Kotas (who, with the Todas, are true aborigines of the Nilgiri toplands) began an upward mobility campaign in an attempt to raise their status in the local caste hierarchy. This involved abandoning practices deemed ritually defiling and grounds for social denigration. One of these was providing music for Toda and Badaga funerals, which caused the

¹³ Hockings (1980a:11-44, 2012c) argues cogently for Badaga migrations in several distinct waves into the Nilgiris from the southern Karnataka Plain. He maintains that such migrations began sometime in the mid-sixteenth century and intensified during the seventeenth century. By the mid-eighteenth century, these various peasant immigrants from Karnataka had likely coalesced to form a distinct and, since the early nineteenth century, closed Nilgiri upland community.

Among the principal characteristics mentioned as linking Badagas with Karnataka is language. The Badaga language (Badagu) is variously stated to be 'Kannada' (or Kannarese), 'a dialect of Kannada', or else 'a separate language, closely related to Kannada'. Recently, however, Pilot-Raichoor (2012) has argued that Badagu's Kannada affiliations have been over-emphasized at the expense of its Tamiloid connections. Noting the linguistic similarities between Badagu and Ālu-Kurumba – indubitably a Tamiloid tongue – she offers the radical hypothesis that, while some ancestral Badaga may have migrated from Karnataka, the people we know today as 'the Badagas' may not have coalesced into a distinct community until a few centuries ago, at which time it may well have incorporated both immigrants and significant numbers of people who had all along been natives of these mountains.

¹⁴ For the history of tea cultivation in the Nilgiris dating to 1854, see Muthiah (2012).

¹⁵ "The Nilgiris District produces hardly any coffee these days; yet it was coffee... that opened out the earliest plantations here," notes Muthiah (2012a:214) at the start of his useful adumbration of the history and former economic importance of coffee in the District.

¹⁶ Hockings (2012a).

entire Kota community to be permanently associated with death pollution.¹⁷

In this manner, the traditional symbiosis between the Nilgiri peoples began breaking down, forcing Todas to innovate in both economic and ritual spheres. In the economic sphere, milk products once bartered with hereditary friends from other castes were now sold for cash in Nilgiri markets and through dairy cooperatives, and the income used to purchase the food grains and artifacts once obtained from Badaga and Kota partners. In the ritual sphere, old practices were abandoned or modified to meet new circumstances. For example, traditional Kota musicians were replaced by professional bands of lowland background hired in Nilgiri towns.

TODA COMMUNITY SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Some basic knowledge of the social organization of this unique community is essential for grasping the complexity of Toda pastoralism in both economic and ritual dimensions.

The person who, to an outsider, is simply a Toda, among his or her own people is a member of several different social groups. He or she belongs to one of two endogamous sub-castes into which the community is divided.¹⁸ Because there are only two, whereas

¹⁷ See Mandelbaum (1960) for Kota efforts to raise their position in the local Nilgiri caste hierarchy.

¹⁸ Bhaskarrarao (2012:924) castigates me for labeling these subdivisions 'sub-castes', saying that such "[u]sage would assume usage of the word 'caste' for the Todas in general." *That* is precisely my intent. But this is not to say the Government of India's designation of the Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas et al. (but not Badagas) as 'scheduled tribes' is unimportant, still less unacceptable to the people so designated. Instead, it affirms that the term 'tribe' lacks comparative sociological validity (Walker 1998:143-50). But I am greatly indebted to Bhaskarrarao (2012), for pointing out Emeneau's (1958a: 273) use of the term 'sub-caste' to substitute for 'moiety', almost three decades before the publication of my first book on the Todas in 1986. Inexcusably, I had missed that datum in my reading of Emeneau's corpus, which, given the esteemed place Emeneau occupies in Toda and Indological studies, surely provides significant support for my own use of his terminological innovation.

commonly in India there would be more, in much of the literature on Todas these major divisions are termed 'moieties'.¹⁹ A Toda is also a member of an exogamous patrilineal clan, which, apart from its constituent hamlets and households, is also segmented into ritual and economic units. In addition he or she is a member of an exogamous matrilineal clan, which has no further subdivisions. Finally, there are kin and affinal groups.

The major cleavages of Toda society – the ones that most affect the ritual dimension of Toda pastoralism – are those represented by the endogamous sub-castes, respectively named Torthash-olkh and Töwfilly-olkh (*olkh* means 'people'),²⁰ and by the exogamous patrilineal clans or *mod-olkh*.

The Toda language has no generic word for 'sub-caste'. Todas refer to persons of the opposite sub-caste as their *soty*, a term derived from the Sanskrit word *jati* – the common Indian term for, among other things, an endogamous caste or sub-caste. The etymologies of the sub-caste names are apparently unknown to modern Todas, although Emeneau²¹ ventures the following derivations: Torthash from *tor* 'important people', plus *thash* 'state of being' (no doubt a reference to the dominant position of this sub-caste, which dwarfs the Töwfilly people demographically [three to one] and owns the community's most sacred dairy-temples and associated buffalo herds); and Töwfilly (from *-filly* = *pilly* meaning 'servants' of the *töw* 'gods'), doubtless reflecting the crucial role that male members of this sub-caste traditionally played as priests and dairymen for the community's most sacred dairies and herds.²²

The removal of the term 'sub-caste' from my contribution (Walker 2012:650-51) for the *Encyclopaedia of the Nilgiri Hills* was an editorial decision to which I had, reluctantly, to agree.

¹⁹ I explain my dislike of the term 'moiety' in reference to Toda social organization in Walker (1998:57-58).

²⁰ I render Toda words in a simplified manner and with much use of hyphenation, seeking to approximate Toda pronunciation. For more rigorous orthography, consult Emeneau (1958b) and Burrow and Emeneau (1984).

²¹ See especially Emeneau (1966:26-28; 1974:6).

²² See below, Rivers (1906:83-84ff), and Walker (1986:145-56). Recently, Tarun Chhabra (MS 2012), who speaks the language fluently, has provided slightly different derivations: Torthash from *tor*, the general name for a

Each Toda sub-caste is divided into a number of *mod*, 'named exogamous patrilineal clans.' At present Torthash has ten such divisions and Töwfilly five. Patriclan affiliation is determined during a rite performed during the mother's pregnancy, when a man formally accepts paternity of the unborn child, thus bestowing upon it membership in his patriclan.²³ Adoption is unknown, thus birth is the only means by which a patriclan recruits its male members; females are incorporated through marriage.

The notion of hierarchy characteristic of the relations between the two sub-castes, is minimal with respect to the patriclans, although one enjoys a certain ritual primacy due to its association with Goddess Tökishy, the preeminent Toda deity.

Every patriclan owns a number of hamlets and its name is normally derived from that of its principal settlement. Several patriclans have specific heroic figures associated with them, but these are not clan ancestors *per se*. Besides its hamlets, which are not necessarily contiguous, each patriclan owns at least two *kedr-mod* 'funeral places', one for males and one for females, while a number of Torthash patriclans own isolated dairy-temple complexes of various degrees of sanctity, including the most sacred of all, the now un-operated *tee* dairies. Clan property also includes the domestic hamlet sites themselves, their dairy-temples, and some of the more sacred grades of buffalo.

There are four additional sociologically significant divisions within the patriclan: *kwir*, *polm*, hamlet, and household. The *kwir* divisions (the term *kwir* 'horn' reflects the binary nature of the segmentation) become operative on certain ritual occasions when it is necessary to expiate offences or counteract misfortune. The *polm* 'portion', on the other hand, are not binary divisions; some patriclans have only two but others, three, four, or five. *Polm* divisions function when it is necessary to collect or distribute money; each division,

patriclan, and *tash*, 'higher', thus 'clans that are higher' (than those of the other subcaste). The etymology of Töwfilly, Chhabra tells us, is more difficult to explain, but his principal informant and teacher in all things Toda, maintains that the name is derived from '*töw*', 'gods', and '*folly*', 'temples', thus 'men who serve in the gods' temples'.

²³ For the ritual details, see Walker (1986:190-92, 1998:81-88, 2012b).

irrespective of the size of its membership, is expected to contribute an equal share.

The third level of patrician segmentation is the hamlet. Clansmen have the right to live in any of their patrician's hamlets, but outsiders may do so only by invitation. The hamlet is an economic unit of sorts – the care of the buffaloes being largely hamlet-based, with all the animals penned and pastured together. However, every family milks its own domestic buffaloes, while a special dairyman-priest is responsible for the hamlet's sacred dairy-temple operations. An explication of Toda ideas concerning 'temple' and 'domestic' buffaloes, and of their dairy-temple, constitutes a major part of what follows.

At the lowest level of patrician segmentation is the household, the people who occupy a single dwelling (*aash*). In modern times the Toda household usually comprises a nuclear family of husband, wife, and unmarried children, sometimes augmented by the widowed parent of the household head and/ or the head's married son, wife, and children. Other than in the case of a widow with young children, the household head is always a man – husband and father of the nuclear family, or the grown son of a widow. He is the owner of the household property: domestic equipment, family heirlooms, buffaloes and, in recent years, a defined portion of government-recognized Toda land. All these assets are divided among sons when the household head dies, or, in the case of buffaloes, when he apportions his animals among his sons once he has retired from active herding. Daughters receive nothing of the family inheritance apart from a small dowry, usually in the form of jewelry. In the past the Toda household frequently comprised a set of brothers and their joint wife, with the brothers usually taking turns to accept paternity of the woman's offspring. Such polyandrous institutions, which have made this people so well-known in the annals of ethnography, no longer operate in Toda society.

Apart from these patrilineally-ascribed social groups, every Toda male and female is also a member of an exogamous matrilineal clan, known as a *poly-olkh*. Torthash has five such matrilineal clans and Töwfilly six. The matrilineal clans are descent categories – of ritual and sexual significance – rather than social groups *per se*. They lack

corporate unity and are minimally related to the Toda buffalo complex.

It may also be noted that Toda society functions without formal headmen at any level, except that of the household. Nevertheless, the community possesses well-defined procedures for ensuring that its members observe community norms, as well as for settling disputes between individuals or factions, and for deciding on united action by the entire Toda community. Whenever it is necessary for the community to take collective action, the adult males convene a *noym* 'caste council'. In the subsequent discussions, the unofficial but clearly recognized community leaders have a decisive role to play. These men – always in late-middle to old-age, sometimes wealthy and, increasingly, with some education – listen quietly while others shout, then slowly begin to take control of the assembly, directing it to an eventual consensus that embraces compromise and, in dispute, reconciliation. Similar assemblies, also called *noym*, may be held within sub-caste, patriclan, or hamlet, depending on the nature of the affair to be discussed.

TODA PASTORALISM

Anthropologists and others concerned with pastoral societies and cultures have stressed the need to reserve the term 'pastoral' for groups whose physical and cultural survival is strongly linked to the acquisition, maintenance, and control of domesticated animals. Only these people, it is argued, should be considered 'true pastoralists'. Others who maintain herds or flocks of domesticated animals mainly for prestige purposes and/ or to supplement their diet (the ingredients for which are procured principally through other economic strategies), are certainly animal husbandry men, but not true pastoralists. If we accept this argument, the only true pastoralists of the Nilgiri Mountains are the Todas or, more accurately, *were* the Todas, because many of them now own no livestock.



FIGURE 8. Toda buffaloes grazing on dried out pasture on the Wenlock Downs. Photograph: ©The author.

Cultural ecologists identify two major forms of pastoralism: nomadism and transhumance. Nomadic pastoralists lack permanent settlements. They move their homes, along with their herds, from pasture to pasture. In contrast, transhumant pastoralists typically have permanent settlements from where some of the herdsmen – usually not all – move to temporary homes at specific times during the year, as seasonal pastures become available. Such seasonal migrations may be 'vertical' with the herds rotated between lower and higher elevations, or 'horizontal' with the animals moved from one pasture to another to take advantage of micro-climatic differences unassociated with elevation.



FIGURE 9. Driving buffaloes to dry-season pastures. Photograph: Pauline Hetland Walker, ©The author.

There are no nomadic pastoralists in the Nilgiri Mountains, nor evidence that there ever have been. The Todas, along with some Kotas and Badagas, traditionally practiced horizontal transhumance. It is common for pastures to become seriously degraded during the dry months between December and March, when the Nilgiri toplands experience low precipitation coupled with cloudless and sharply sunny days, followed by frosty nights. Toda herdsmen consequently followed a regimen of horizontal transhumance, moving livestock to special 'dry season' pastures located in the western catchment area of the mountains, where the high-rainfall, grasslands provided excellent fodder at that time of the year. The Toda husbands, wives, children, and dairymen resided in hamlets here that had the same domestic residences, buffalo pens, calf-sheds, and dairy-temples as the settlements they had left behind.²⁴



FIGURE 10. Kwehrshy, a dry-season hamlet belonging to Möhdr patriclan. Photograph: ©Tarun Chhabra.

As the southwest monsoon begins to break in early June, the exposed western escarpments of the mountains are beset with cold winds and rain, making the seasonal settlements and surrounding

²⁴ Todas call these settlements *pyoolvehn mod*, 'sunny-season hamlets'.

grasslands largely intolerable for herdsmen and livestock alike, thus requiring a return to permanent homes to the east.

The Todas were true pastoralists in that their entire tradition – economic, social, and ritual – has traditionally focused on the ownership and care of a single species of animal, the Toda breed of the Indian river buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*). It is only during the last forty or fifty years that significant numbers of Todas have accepted the possibility of a livelihood not based on buffaloes.²⁵ This has transpired due to externally-generated, socio-economic pressure from the politico-administrative establishment – especially since India's freedom from British rule – that seems to have limited comprehension of the value of the pastoral alternative.

The relationship of the Todas to their buffaloes transcends mundane considerations of ownership and economic worth. They regard the buffalo as a special gift from the gods, particularly, according to modern Todas, from the preeminent deity, Goddess Tökishy. In Toda legends, buffaloes frequently talk and assume other anthropomorphic characteristics. One story has a buffalo and a man putting foreheads together and mourning in the manner Todas still observe at their funerals,²⁶ while another tells how a buffalo once established a particularly sacred dairy-temple. Even today, Todas credit their buffaloes with almost human intelligence.

Toda males' intense interest in buffaloes develops early in life. Small boys mold mud into buffalo images; construct model pens and dairies of sticks, stones, and mud; and spend hours at home in the hamlet or out on the grasslands absorbed in 'playing buffalo herding'. Another favorite pastime is fashioning buffalo horns, which often extends into adulthood. Toda men frequently pick up a forked twig or an old piece of wire and, more or less unconsciously, begin shaping it into the shape of a pair of buffalo horns.

'Buffalo' for the Todas, is virtually synonymous with 'cow buffalo'; the word employed generically for 'buffaloes', *ir*, actually means 'adult female buffalo'. This usage signifies the singular importance of the adult females as the source of milk and its products. As the Todas are vegetarians, male buffaloes have no value

²⁵ See Walker (2012a).

²⁶ See Walker (1986:223-24) for further details.

to them except for breeding. Approximately one stud bull per three hamlets is retained for breeding purposes. Other male calves are sold to Nilgiri butchers after a year or so. In times past, a Toda gave his official Kota partner one male calf annually; also, a few male calves were once sacrificed and their meat consumed in a ritual meal, a custom apparently now abandoned.

As is common among pastoralists, the Todas have an extensive buffalo vocabulary identifying individual buffaloes by stages of growth, physical peculiarities, capacity for milk-giving, calf bearing, and so on.²⁷ The most important distinction that Todas make among female buffaloes is between the animals particularly associated with the sacred dairy-temples (generically termed *post-ir*, but with specific names according to their position in the ritual hierarchy) and the majority, called *pity-ir*, that are herded principally for domestic purposes.

The temple buffaloes are ranked according to the grade of the dairy-temple with which they are principally associated, with Toda concepts of ritual purity and pollution of vital importance in ranking both dairies and animals. In brief, the higher a buffalo's grade, the greater the care that must be taken to prevent its ritual defilement. Women may not milk a buffalo of any grade and laymen may only milk non-temple animals. Milk from temple buffaloes must be drawn by a dairyman-priest of appropriately high ritual status and purity, or else left for its calves to consume.

Finally, each adult female buffalo has its own name, ritually bestowed on the animal when it has calved for the first time, or else when it has been determined that it is barren. I witnessed on several occasions how Toda buffaloes respond to their names.

Todas know the pedigree of each one of the buffaloes they own, which runs exclusively in the female line. A female calf belongs to the same grade as its mother; the identity of its sire is irrelevant to the Todas. The bull may not even be a Toda buffalo; hence the possibility of crossbreeding, as has been done with Murrah buffalo bulls from North India, without affecting the ritual situation of the stock. Male buffaloes (in Toda, *er*) figure minimally, both in the

²⁷ See Walker (1986:104) for details.

economics of Toda pastoralism and its ritual dimension. Indicative of their lesser value in Toda eyes, male beasts – even the finest stud bull – are never named.



FIGURE 11. Thoroughbred Toda buffaloes graze on the Wenlock Downs. The relatively fair hair and characteristic upward-curving horns are evident in this photograph. Photograph: ©The author.

THE TODAS' MOUNTAIN BUFFALOES

The breed of buffaloes that Todas (and some Kotas and Badagas)²⁸ herd are far removed from the dark-skinned, slow-moving, docile beasts commonly seen on the surrounding plains of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala. Classified as a distinctive South Indian breed of *Bubalus bubalis*,²⁹ the Toda buffalo has a stockier build, lighter skin color, and more hair (an adaptation to the cool mountain environment) than lowland breeds. It has relatively short, sturdy legs, a broad chest, and a large and heavy head, characteristically carried low, from which the horns usually curve upwards to form two impressive semicircles. It is finely adapted to the Nilgiri Mountains, moving with ease across the undulating downs, thriving on their coarse grasses and tolerating, without shelter, the cold rain and hail of the southwest monsoon and the heavy ground frosts of its northeast counterpart.

²⁸ See Noble (1977) and Hockings (2012c) for Badaga herding of Toda buffaloes and associated ritual; see Wolf (2012) for Kota buffalo herding and occasional sacrifice at funeral ceremonies.

²⁹ Gunn (1909:50).

The Toda buffalo has long been admired and feared by visitors to the Nilgiris, due to its robust build, swiftness on hoof, and ferocity. These animals are completely at ease in the company of their owners – even small Toda boys confidently mingle with the herds that belong to their fathers – but if a stranger approaches, their typical reaction is to abruptly throw up their heads, speedily retreat some distance, halt, turn, and stare at the interloper. The wise man now beats a hasty retreat, especially if he sees calves among the herd, lest their agitated mothers, heads lowered, mount a mass charge with the intent of trampling and goring to death the object of their fears.

The Toda buffalo's proverbial ferocity and ability to use its horns to maximum advantage is evident when a prowling tiger attacks. A single buffalo may prove no match for the great cat, but if the animals are grazing in a herd, they form themselves into a circle as soon as they sense a tiger's presence, tails to the center and horns at the perimeter, so that, wherever the predator strikes, it is met by a great pair of sharply-pointed horns.³⁰

Some Toda buffalo are now feral, due to the community's gradual abandonment, completed in the early 1950s, of the dairies known as *tee* and their sacred buffaloes, the *tee-ir*. These feral *tee* herds are ferocious to the point that they have been known to kill encroaching humans. The danger they pose is further enhanced by the presence among them (in contrast to the domestic herds) of many bull buffaloes.

THE CARE AND OWNERSHIP OF BUFFALOES

Toda men and boys traditionally took exclusive care of buffaloes, in recognition of human males' superior ritual purity.³¹ Processing buffalo milk is also an exclusively male task. In general, younger men

³⁰ I mention Toda buffaloes protecting themselves against tiger attack in Walker (2012b), where there is a reference to Power (1954), an article concerning buffalo (not Toda) response to leopard attack. I was not consulted on this editorial insertion.

³¹ In recent times, females occasionally assist males in steadying animals prior to milking, but even this limited contact seems rare.

and boys are responsible for the ordinary, non-temple-based dairy activities, though elders may participate if they wish. Specially-appointed and ordained dairymen-priests are responsible for temple animals.

In the past, rhythms of pastoral life³² shaped the daily routine in every Toda hamlet. Buffaloes were milked morning and evening, but ranged freely over their grazing grounds most of the day, often untended. Once the milk had been churned and the butter clarified to make ghee, a Toda pastoralist was at leisure. His family's requirements other than buffalo milk and its products were mostly supplied by Kota, Badaga, and Kurumba neighbors in the complex set of trading-cum-ritual relationships alluded to earlier, typifying *jajmani*-type systems throughout India.³³

The situation is much changed today. Grazing buffaloes need to be watched lest they stray into cultivated fields and forest plantations; and grain, pots, implements, and forest materials do not come from neighbors in exchange for dairy products but must be purchased in markets for cash. In general, Toda households keep far fewer buffaloes than in years past and usually sell raw whatever spare milk they have from their domestic animals, rather than processing it. As already mentioned, many households now own no livestock.

Beyond the routine care of the buffaloes, milking, pasturing, penning, and tending to the young calves, there are certain occasional events, essentially utilitarian in nature, but enveloped also in ritual activity, that dairymen-priests (rather than ordinary herdsman) must supervise. These include giving salt to buffaloes, migrating with them to new pastures, and burning off old grass to permit regrowth.³⁴

³² See Walker (1986:108-14) for specifics.

³³ See Mandelbaum (1970:159-80) for an explication of *jajmani* relationships.

³⁴ See Rivers (1906:123-43, 166-81) and Walker (1986:158-83) for ritual details.



FIGURE 12. A circular buffalo pen cut into the hillside on one side with a rough wooden fence on the other. Photograph: ©The author.



FIGURE 13. Driving buffaloes to salt pits. Photograph: ©The author.



FIGURE 14. A dairyman-priest clad in priestly black loincloth called *tiny* adds salt to a pit filled with water from the dairy stream. As a buffalo drinks, the remainder of the herd is being driven to the pit. Photograph: Pauline Hetland Walker, ©The author.



FIGURE 15. A Toda lad's pride and joy. Photograph: ©The author.



FIGURE 16. Calves resting in the sunshine in front of the *polly* at Melgaash patriclan's chief hamlet located just above the botanical gardens in Ootacamund. Behind the dairy-temple is an extensive area of gazetted Toda lands (*patta*) that have been terraced for potato and cabbage cultivation. Some of the lands are worked by Todas themselves, but many have been leased to outsiders. Photograph: ©The author.

A buffalo herd was generally held in common by brothers when fraternal polyandry was the norm among Todas. They divided the herd only if they quarreled among themselves. Today, brothers may still sometimes share a herd, but mostly the domestic (and some temple) animals belong to individual men, the heads of their respective households. Buffaloes rather frequently change hands as animals are given as gifts, in compensation for taking another man's wife, and in payment of fines. Great numbers of buffaloes were sacrificed at funerals in former times. By the 1960s the number of sacrificial beasts had been reduced to two, or even one; today, one or even none seems more usual.

Todas have traditionally obtained milk, buttermilk, and ghee from their domestic herds. But for almost a century now, increasing numbers of Toda households have derived cash income from the sale of raw milk, ghee, and, occasionally, a buffalo or calf. Buffalo dung

may also be sold as fertilizer, and has been an increasingly valuable commodity since the 1970s.



FIGURE 17. Layman milking domestic buffalo at Kaash Hamlet, popularly known outside the Toda community as 'Kandalmund' and located within the municipal limits of Ootacamund. Photograph: ©PK Nambiar.

In 1978 I estimated that an average Toda household, comprising husband, wife, and three to four children needed four to five milking buffaloes producing at least fifteen liters of milk per day (five liters for domestic use and ten liters for sale) if it intended to earn its livelihood solely from dairying. This required access to a herd of twelve to fifteen animals, including calves. During a livestock census that I conducted in 2000, I discovered that only nineteen (nine percent) of 202 households surveyed claimed to own a herd of twelve or more buffaloes.

The majority of Toda buffaloes are of domestic rather than temple grade. In the 2000 count, there were 713 secular, to 199

temple buffaloes in the 202 households surveyed. Thirty years earlier in 1970, the ratio was rather similar, seventy-one percent 'domestic' to twenty-nine percent 'temple' in a sample of twenty-eight households. Toda who own just a few buffaloes prefer not to have temple animals in their herd, since they cannot benefit economically from the sale of their milk, which is too sacred to be transferred to outsiders. If a man has ten to fifteen temple buffaloes, he may be in a position to operate a dairy-temple, either by employing a dairyman-priest or by becoming one himself if he is ritually qualified to do so. Ghee from the temple herd (the making of which, as noted earlier, removes the sanctity of the milk) may then be sold for profit. But in the year 2000, only five (2.5 percent) of the 202 surveyed households claimed to own ten or more temple animals. Clearly this is not a viable option for most contemporary Todas.

Early nineteenth century reports that the Toda community possessed great herds of buffaloes were probably much exaggerated. James Hough(1829:75) suggested the community, which he counted as numbering 326persons, owned as many as 10,000 animals in 1825. The first actual count of the Toda herds, in 1847 (Ouchterlony 1848:90-94), put the number of Toda buffaloes as 6,498 for a population he counted as numbering 917. A typical buffalo-to-person ratio through the first three-quarters of the twentieth century (the demographics of the Toda community were by then much more reliable) was approximately three to one; by 1988 this had dropped to only 1.3 buffaloes per person and in2000, to just under one (0.99).

Between 1930 and 1975, the overall number of buffaloes owned by the Toda community showed a slow but steady rise in tandem with an increase in the Toda population itself. In 1930, there were 1,619 buffaloes for 597 people; in 1960 there were 2,186 buffaloes for 612 people; and in 1975, there were 2,650 buffaloes for 948 people. Thereafter, while the Toda population continued increasing, their buffalo herds began shrinking dramatically. Between 1975 and 1988, the Toda population (excluding Christians) rose by seventy-nine, the buffalo population fell by 1,317, or by about fifty percent. The decline continues, although less rapidly. By 2000, I inferred from my count of seventy-seven percent of all Toda hamlets that the herds had lost another 133 head.

The decline is due to the State and National governments having commandeered large areas of traditional Toda pasture for reforestation and hydroelectricity production; added to this, the Todas themselves have found it profitable to break up what lands remain to them for crop production.³⁵ Until recently, renters from other communities have been responsible for most of the farm work; slowly, however, more and more Todas – bereft of their buffaloes – have taken up hoes and digging forks. It no longer seems far-fetched to foresee a time when no 'true pastoralists' will remain on the Nilgiri Mountains.

TEMPLES AND TEMPLE BUFFALOES

Simply stated, the Todas categorize their buffalo herds into domestic and temple grades. The reality, however, is not so straightforward. This is because (a) there exists an elaborate gradation of the temple animals, generically termed *post-ir*, and (b) a degree of sanctity adheres to all *female* buffaloes, but none to males, whether born of a secular or temple dam. It is for the latter reason that I prefer the terms 'domestic' and 'temple' over the more common 'sacred' and 'non-sacred' buffaloes.

Domestic buffaloes (generically, *pity-ir*) and lower-grade temple buffaloes may be owned by individual men, by brothers, or by brothers and their sons, while the higher grades of temple buffaloes are always the common property of a patriclan. Responsibility for their care, in this society without individual political office, lies with the collectivity of clan elders.

Traditional Toda ritual activities that survive despite the recent decline of pastoralism in favor of agriculture³⁶ revolve mainly around the community's sacred dairies. The more important sacred dairies are imbued with divinity as *töw-nor*, the 'gods of the places' or, more accurately, 'the places that are gods'. Sacred dairies are the Todas' temples that they identify as such when speaking in Tamil or English. Specially consecrated and ritually pure dairymen (the

³⁵ Walker (2012a).

³⁶ Walker (2012a).

community's priests) process buffaloes' milk in these sacred buildings.

Among the Toda, virtually every major activity connected with the dairy-temples and their associated buffalo herds receives the imprint of ritual: building or rebuilding a dairy, re-thatching its roof, consecrating a dairyman for it, introducing dairying equipment into the building, lighting the dairy lamp and fire, processing milk into butter and ghee, and distributing the byproduct, buttermilk, are all highly ritualized acts, as also are the milking of the temple buffaloes, the naming of all buffaloes, giving the animals salt water to drink on specified occasions, migrating with them to fresh pastures, burning off pastures to ensure new, succulent grass for them, offering them as gifts or fines, and sacrificing them at funerals.



FIGURE 18. Kaash, the chief hamlet of the patriclan of the same name. In the left background is the domestic area with, at the present time, entirely non-traditional architecture. To the right foreground is the hamlet's *wīs-oly*-grade dairy temple and in the right middle ground is the lower-ranking *kur-polly*. (These dairies are misidentified in my 1986 book on the Todas [Walker 1986: Pl. 14a, facing p. 124]). Photograph: ©The author.



FIGURE 19. The newly-renovated (year 2000) *tor-folly*-grade dairy at Nawsh Clan's Teshtery Hamlet. Photograph: ©The author.



FIGURE 20. The dairy-temple of Pekhor Hamlet (Mortkör patriclan, Töwfilly sub-caste), with fine Toda buffaloes in front. Photograph: Pauline Hetland Walker, ©The author.

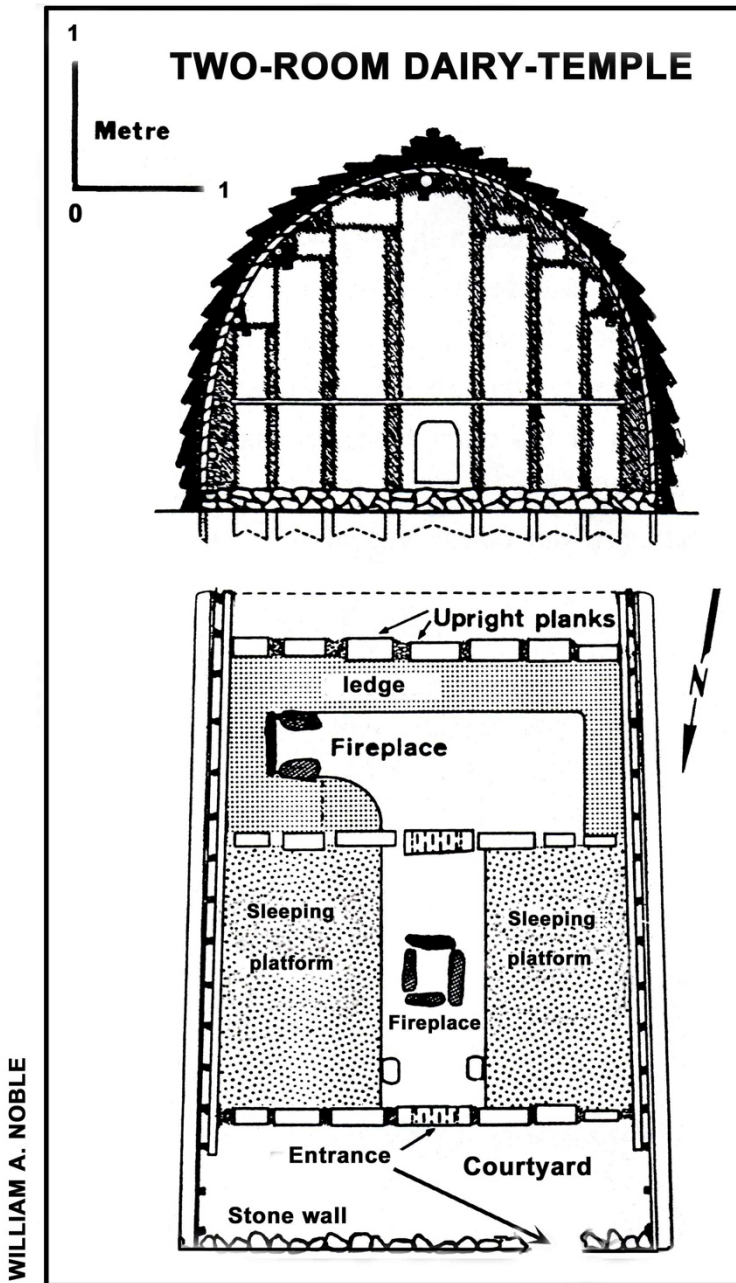


FIGURE 21. Plan of the front and interior of a two-roomed dairy temple.
Courtesy, William A. Noble.



FIGURE 22. Dairyman-priest applying sacred butter processed in the dairy-temple onto the wall above the entrance of Konawsh foh, one of two extant Toda conical dairy-temples. Photograph: ©Tarun Chhabra.

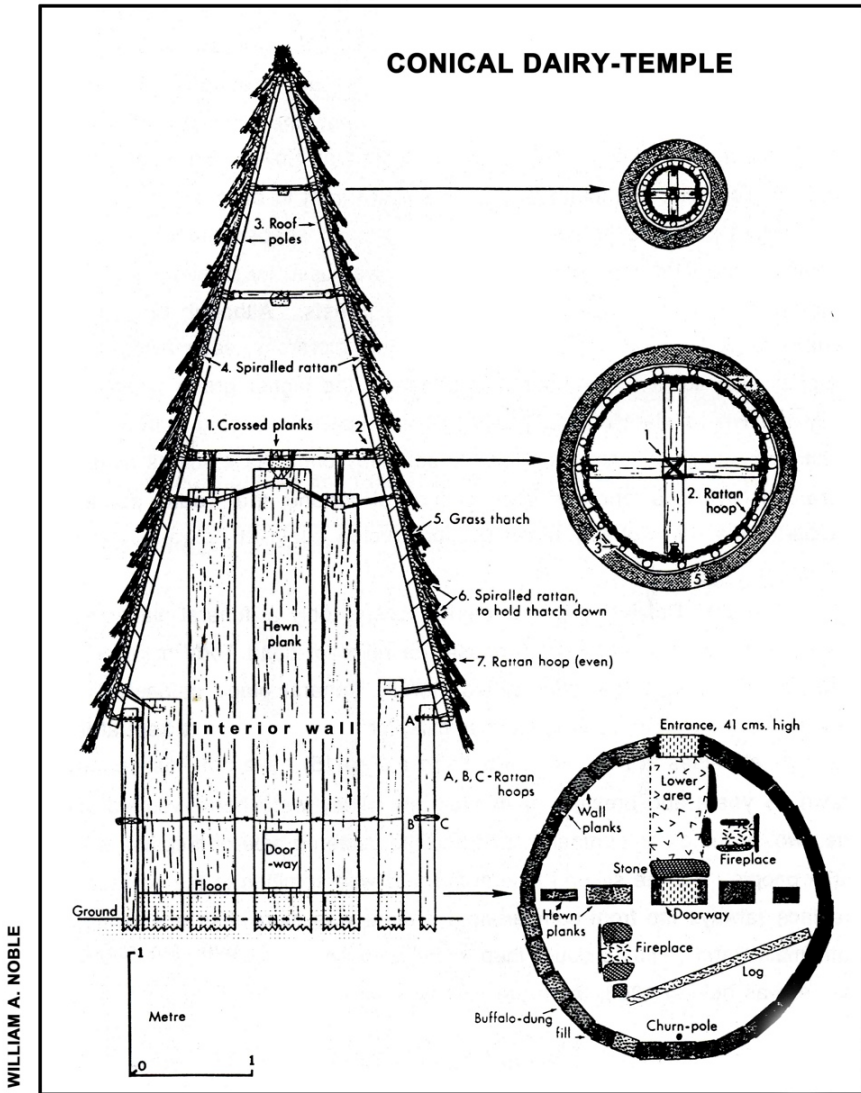


FIGURE 23. Plan of the front and interior of a long-defunct conical dairy at one of the *tee* dairy complexes. Courtesy, William A Noble.



FIGURE 24. Kithdu, the disabled dairyman-priest of the Melgaash patriclan sitting outside his dairy-temple at his clan's chief hamlet above Ootacamund's Botanical Gardens. He wears secular attire during a break from his ritual duties. Whereas most boys and men serve at a dairy-temple for only a few weeks or months at a time, Kithdu, whose disability precluded his functioning as a herdsman, was a more or less full-time *polly-kartpolkh* for more than 30 years. Photograph: Pauline Hetland Walker, ©The author.



FIGURE 25. Dairyman-priest in black loincloth (*tūny*) at Nūln seasonal hamlet milking a sacred temple buffalo in his charge at a newly-opened seasonal hamlet. The horns and skin color of the temple buffalo indicate that it is a cross-breed, probably with Murrah buffalo genes, rather than a thoroughbred Toda animal. Photograph: ©Tarun Chhabra.



FIGURE 26. Re-thatching a dairy-temple at Inkitty hamlet, 1974. Photograph: Pauline Hetland Walker, ©The author.



FIGURE 27. Toda women dancing to mark the successful conclusion of a dairy-temple re-thatching at Inkitty hamlet, 1974. Photograph: Pauline Hetland Walker, ©The author.

Dairy temples, their furnishings, and equipment, must be maintained at a high level of ritual purity, as must the lives of the dairymen themselves. The higher the grade of a dairy, the greater its sanctity and, consequently, the more stringent the rules for maintaining the purity of every person and thing associated with it. Ritual purity is achieved through rigid avoidance of physical contact with persons, especially sexually mature females, and objects of the inherently impure secular world of domestic life: birth, menstruation, copulation, and death. People and objects from outside the Toda community are also avoided.



FIGURE 28. Young dairy-man priest at Nūln seasonal hamlet standing at the dairy entrance holds a cane churning stick and bamboo milking vessel. The fern is said to protect the ritual purity of these sacred artifacts while they are outside of the dairy. Photograph: ©Tarun Chhabra.

Most Toda dairy-temples are half-barrel-shaped. There are only two remaining conical – and particularly sacred – dairies, termed *poh*. The majority of dairies have a front and a rear room. The front room has a raised earthen platform on each side; these are the sleeping and resting places for the dairyman and, if he has one, his

assistant. Between the two platforms is an earthen hearth, not for cooking but merely for warmth. Certain appurtenances not associated with the dairy ritual are kept in this front room: a bamboo water vessel for the dairyman's ablutions, an axe for chopping firewood, the firewood itself, a woven cane basket for carrying rice or other food grains into the dairy, and the dairyman's secular clothing.

The inner room is the ritual heart of the temple. The sacred dairy equipment is stored in this room and the dairyman also performs the most important duty of his office here: the churning of milk into butter and buttermilk. There are two principal areas within this most sacred inner room, corresponding to the two categories of dairy equipment. There is a raised earthen shelf on the right hand side as one enters the room, on which is kept the less-sacred of the dairy equipment, the *er-tat-far*: earthenware and bamboo vessels used to store and carry away the products of the dairy; vessels that the dairyman uses to cook his own food on a second hearth, to the left in this inner room; the firesticks he employs to produce fire by friction because matches and lighters may not be used inside a dairy-temple; and the dairy lamp.

Certain of these items come into contact with the impure world outside the dairy and therefore the whole category is considered to be of inferior sanctity compared to the objects (termed *po-tat-far*) that are kept on a second earthen shelf, against the back wall of the dairy.

Among the *po-tat-far* are the vessels used for milking, for storing the milk, and for churning. The total separation of this most sacred – and therefore most pure – category of dairy equipment from the impure outside world necessitates that the butter and buttermilk be transferred to vessels of the less-sacred grade before they are moved from the dairy.

Some dairy-temples also possess ritual artifacts of the very highest sanctity. These are metal objects (iron, silver, and gold are reported) that are attached to the rear wall of the dairy's inner room and are covered with ferns to protect their purity. Generically they are termed *monny*, meaning 'bell', though I was informed that most of them are not actually bells. Certain evidence nonetheless suggests

that the prototypical *monny* were indeed bells that were hung around the necks of especially sacred or important buffaloes.

Finally, among the most sacred of the dairy appurtenances is another earthen vessel that is not kept inside the building at all, but is buried in the ground some distance away. The purity of the entire dairy-temple is linked to the condition of this pot, called *muu*. If the building is defiled by contact with impure persons or objects, the *muu* must be excavated and a series of complex purification rites performed.³⁷



FIGURE 29 Making obeisance to the dairy-temple entrance during a temple-purification rite. Photograph: Pauline Hetland Walker, ©The author.

The dairy's daily routine begins soon after dawn, when the dairyman leaves the outer room where he has spent the night, and salutes the rising sun, first removing his cloak from his right shoulder – symbolizing respect – and then raising his outstretched right hand to his forehead, while simultaneously uttering the single word *sawn* (from *swamy*, 'Lord', 'God', 'Divinity'). He releases the buffaloes from the hamlet pen (temple and domestic animals are penned together),

³⁷ See Walker (1986:165-66) for details.

re-enters the dairy-temple to churn, according to prescribed rules, the milk he drew from the animals the previous evening; stores the butter and buttermilk; and then goes out again to milk the animals in his charge. Laymen milk the remaining domestic buffaloes. Finally, the dairyman passes the buttermilk vessel to a layman who, in turn, brings it to a prescribed spot usually marked by a stone or stones that is the boundary between the sacred and secular areas of the hamlet. Women may assemble here to receive the buttermilk; on no condition, however, may they pass into the sacred area.

The dairy procedures of the late afternoon to early evening are more highly ritualized than those of the morning. The dairyman bows down at the entrance of his dairy, touching his forehead to the threshold, before entering the outer room. He then bows likewise at the threshold of the sacred inner room, enters, and first touches a vessel of the less-sacred *er-tat* grade of dairy equipment and then one of the more-sacred *po-tat* vessels. He fans up the fire or, if necessary, rekindles it with fire produced with special firesticks, thus replicating the ancient manner in which Todas produced fire. He lights the lamp and salutes it as he had the rising sun in the morning; but now, in place of the single utterance, "*sawn*," he recites a formal invocatory prayer beginning with a recitation of the sacred names or *kwasham* in couplets of the hamlet, dairy, buffaloes, cattle pens and nearby natural features – hills, swamps, streams, etc. – and concludes with a series of requests for boons, as for example:³⁸

"May that which gives milk, give milk! May that which grows, grow!"

"May the barren women bear children! May the barren buffaloes bear calves!"

"May the god of the dairy subdue disease! May the god of the dairy subdue illness!"

"May the god give us living children! May the god give us living calves!"

"May the god subdue the messenger of death! May the god subdue the Tamilians!"

³⁸ See Emeneau (1974:16).

The lamp lit and prayer recited, the dairyman proceeds to churn the morning's milk. He stores the butter and buttermilk in their appropriate vessels, after which he sets off to milk the temple buffaloes once more. This task done, he pens the animals for the night and, facing the entrance of the pen, salutes it, while repeating the dairy prayer he uttered when lighting the temple lamp. His ritual activities are at an end. He now prepares and eats his evening meal, after which he may sleep.

The principal objectives of the Toda sacred dairy operations are for the dairyman-priest, a man or youth of greater ritual purity than ordinary males, to milk the temple buffaloes in his charge, and to process their milk inside the dairy-temple, producing butter, buttermilk, and ghee. The milk drawn for a dairy is sacred, whatever the grade of buffalo from which it is derived. On the other hand, buttermilk and butter have much less sanctity, and ghee has none. It is thus possible to interpret the entire dairy ritual, though this is not an indigenous exegesis, as a procedure for diluting the extreme sanctity of the milk in order that its final product, ghee, may be consumed by and traded with anybody.

THE DAIRY HIERARCHY

The foregoing description of the dairy and of the daily routine associated with it applies to all Toda dairies, but there are many additions and refinements that need to be adumbrated for the reader to grasp the complexity of the ritual dimension of Toda dairying.

Dairies and buffalo herds are graded into a complex hierarchy according to relative sanctity; the higher their position in that hierarchy, the more elaborate is the ritual associated with the daily tasks of the dairyman and the more stringent the precautions for maintaining the purity of the dairy, its appurtenances, and its incumbent dairyman. More elaborate also are the rites required to purify a *per-olkh* 'layman' to the level of ritual purity required for him to operate the dairy.

The dairy hierarchy (see following table), in practice, pertains almost entirely to dairies belonging to members of Torthash sub-

caste, since all those owned by Töwfilly clans are of the same, lowly grade.

At the zenith of the dairy hierarchy are the institutions known as *tee*, the name deriving ultimately from Sanskrit *sri*, "holiness, sacredness."³⁹ Five Torthash patriclans traditionally owned dairy complexes of this most sacred category, all but one of which comprised two or more settlements, or *tee mod*. These sacred settlements were often located far apart, the buffaloes being driven from one to another *tee mod* of the same complex at stipulated times and over prescribed paths. Moreover, each *tee* settlement had either one or two dairies, along with such subsidiary buildings as huts for the dairymen and calf-sheds and pens for the animals, a sacred and a non-sacred water source (for the dairyman and his assistant respectively), and surrounding pastures. The associated buffalo herds included both highly sacred grades (collectively, *pen-ir*), as well as others (*piny-ir*), whose level of sanctity corresponded to that of the ordinary domestic beasts of the larger community. In fact, the *tee* complexes were not just another, higher, grade of Toda dairy; they were microcosms of the wider Toda dairy cult, *in both its sacred and secular dimensions* and maintained at the highest possible level of purity.

Here, I omit the details of the *tee* dairy complexes and confine myself to those grades of dairy that still function, albeit some of them only very sporadically. I treat each grade of dairy separately, but present a relatively comprehensive account only of the low-grade Töwfilly dairies (*polly*). Subsequent descriptions of the several higher grades of Torthash dairy-temples will simply refer back to the data provided for the Töwfilly *polly*.

Notwithstanding omissions and adumbrations, the quantity and intricacy of the ritual details may still seem incredible, but it must be noted that these details are vital to the Todas, or at least were to those who led the community at the time of my fieldwork in the 1960s and '70s.

It must also be emphasized that, although almost every grade of dairy-temple has a particular grade of buffalo associated with it, buffaloes of a lower grade may also be milked at any Toda dairy

³⁹ Emeneau (1953:106-108; 1971:xlili, n.21).

except – when they still functioned – at the very highest: the *tee* which, as we have observed, had their own equivalent to the domestic animals of the community at large. Moreover, the milk of the lower-grade buffaloes may be churned together with that of the dairy's higher-grade animals without polluting it. This suggests that it is the dairy that sacralizes the milk drawn for it, rather than milk being sanctified by its source, the buffalo. This consideration has been overlooked by most ethnographers of Toda society, but it means that discussion of the ritual dimension of Toda pastoralism must give precedence to the dairies as the prime source of sanctity, rather than, as has usually been done, to the buffaloes.

Conversely, female buffaloes obviously possess sanctity in their own right, and even domestic animals may be seen as constituting the lowest grade in the hierarchy, rather than being a totally different category of buffalo. The sanctity of the buffaloes in their own right is evident in the fact that higher-grade animals may not be milked at lower-grade dairies, because this defiles them.

FIGURE 30. The Hierarchy of Dairies and Buffaloes (graded from one to eight, low to high).⁴⁰

Dairy Name	Grade	Associated Herd	Grade	Dairyman	Qualifications
Torthash <i>tor-folly</i>	1	<i>noshpep-ir</i> (6 patriclans) <i>penep-ir</i> (3 patriclans)	1	<i>tor-folly</i> <i>kartpolkh/</i> <i>mox</i>	any Torthash male
Melgaash <i>polly</i>	2	<i>peshosh-ir</i>	1	<i>polly</i> <i>kartpolkh/</i> <i>mox</i>	males of Melgaash patriclan only
Töwfilly <i>polly</i>	2	<i>post-ir</i>	1	<i>polly</i> <i>kartpolkh/</i> <i>mokh</i>	any Töwfilly male

⁴⁰ A simplified transcription of Toda names is given in this table; for linguistically accurate renditions, see Walker (1986:129).

<i>kur-polly</i>	3	<i>mort-ir</i> (Kaash Clan) <i>noshpep-ir</i> (Mör Clan)	2 2	<i>kur-polly</i> <i>kartpolkh/</i> <i>mox</i>	any Torthash male, or a Töwfilly man under certain circumstances
<i>wish-olly</i>	4	<i>wish-olly-ir</i>	3	<i>wish-olkh</i>	any Töwfilly male or a Torthash man of Melgaash Clan
Konawsh <i>foh</i> ⁴¹	5	<i>noshpep-ir</i>	1	<i>poh</i> <i>kartpolkh</i>	mature males of Kerrir Clan only
<i>kog-folly</i>	6	<i>kog-folly-ir</i>	4	<i>kog-folly</i> <i>kartpolkh/</i> <i>mokh</i>	males of Tawrradr Clan only
<i>tee poh</i> (lower grade)	7	<i>peshn-ir</i> , (lower grade) <i>piny-ir</i>	5 1	<i>pol-olkh</i> and	A Töwfilly male (some restrictions)
<i>tee poh</i> (higher grade)	8	<i>peshn-ir</i> , (higher grade) <i>piny-ir</i>	6 1	assistant (called <i>kolt-mokh</i>)	a Töwfilly youth or a Torthash youth of Melgaash Clan

Töwfilly Sub-caste's *Polly*

The patrilans of the Töwfilly sub-caste have no hierarchy of grades among their dairies and temple buffaloes. All Töwfilly dairies are of the same grade and all are designated by the generic term for a dairy, *polly*. Associated with these *polly* are buffaloes called *post-ir*, the single grade of temple buffalo traditionally owned by this sub-caste. But, as at all Toda dairies other than the very highest, lower-grade animals may also be milked by the officiating dairyman and their

⁴¹ All Todas regard the conical *poh* dairy at Konawsh as possessing particular sanctity, but may not necessarily ascribe it the ranking given in this table.

milk churned together with that from the buffaloes particularly associated with the grade of dairy concerned. The only buffaloes ranked below *post-ir* are the ordinary domestic animals, called *pity-ir*. In the case of the Töwfilly *polly*, therefore, domestic *pity-ir* as well as *post-ir* may be milked by the dairyman-priest.

Töwfilly *polly*, without a hierarchy of grade, are nonetheless distinguished by their measure of sanctity. Thus, a number of Töwfilly hamlets traditionally have had two dairies, terminologically distinguished as *kog-folly* 'big dairy' and *kid-folly* 'small dairy'.⁴² Though of identical grade, served by dairymen of the same ritual status, and associated with the same grade of buffalo, the *kog-folly* are more sacred than the *kid-folly* because of their current or former possession of a sacred *monny*. This, in turn, requires the performance of the special rite of 'feeding the *monny*', which the dairyman must perform before churning the milk each morning, anointing the *monny* three times with some of the broken-up curd from his churning pot, and each time uttering the sacred syllable, "awn" (seemingly cognate with the Sanskrit *om*). If a *kog-folly*'s *monny* has been lost, the dairyman anoints the dairy wall where it would have been hung.

The Töwfilly dairies are operated by dairymen-priests called *polly-kartpolkh*, 'men (*olkh*) who milk at the *polly*', or, if young, *polly-kartmokh* 'boys (*mokh*) who milk at the *polly*'. The dairyman or dairy boy is from about twelve years of age upwards, which is the age at which he is capable of learning and remembering the dairy prayers and rituals. He is usually a member of the patriclan that owns the dairy, otherwise, he may be a member of the same sub-caste. A member of Torthash sub-caste may not serve at a Töwfilly dairy.

Just like every other Toda dairy office, that of *polly-kartpolkh* or *polly-kartmokh* is not a life-long appointment. All Toda males are expected to officiate at a dairy-temple at least once in their lifetime, according to their eligibility. Failure to undertake priestly office is considered a ritual omission, like failing to marry – a man should not leave this world without having performed the duties of a husband, father, and dairyman. A man or youth may serve as dairyman for as

⁴² In Toda, 'p' and 'f' are frequently interchangeable, but in this case, the temple is always pronounced '*kog-folly*', never '*kog-polly*'.

long or short a period as he wishes or for which he has contracted. When the dairyman serves in his own hamlet, he usually receives no payment, but if another hamlet seeks his services, he may be compensated in cash or kind – there are no specific rules about this.

Before a dairyman begins his priestly duties, he must undergo an ordination ceremony, the main purpose of which is to raise him to a level of ritual purity consonant with the sanctity of the dairy in which he is to serve. For a Töwfilly *polly* the induction process begins in the early morning when the dairyman-designate goes to the dairy without eating. Being alone or with a companion does not matter. However, there will probably be a knowledgeable bystander to direct the proceedings if he is inexperienced. He bows at the dairy threshold, washes his hands with water given to him by the outgoing dairyman or, if there is none, he washes at the dairy stream. He then changes his clothes in the outer room of the dairy. Leaving his ordinary white loincloth and embroidered cloak there, he dons a *tüny*, the dairyman's black loincloth provided by members of the hamlet in which the dairy is located; the candidate receives the *tüny* from the outgoing dairyman or brings it with him. Thus properly clad, he goes to the dairy stream where he collects seven *mülly-esh* (*mülly*, Yellow Bramble, *Rubus ellipticus*; *esh*, 'leaf') and a handful of young shoots of the same plant, which he pulps on a stone at the edge of the dairy stream. He takes some of the pulp, dips it into the stream, and squeezes out liquid three times onto one of the leaves. He raises this leaf to his forehead before drinking the infusion and then throws the leaf backwards over his head. He repeats the process with each of the remaining six leaves. The candidate then collects the used shoots, again dips them in water, rubs his face and body three times with them and, finally, puts the shoots into his hair at the back of his head.

The dairyman-designate has now achieved a state of ritual purity sufficient for him to begin the final rites of ordination. He returns to the dairy where the outgoing dairyman has placed a *muu* or earthen pot of *po-tat* grade and some strands of *kakarkh* grass (*Eragrostis nigra*) at the entrance. The candidate ritually sweeps the threshold of the dairy with the grass and bows to the *muu*. He repeats this sequence three times before entering the dairy. Proceeding directly to the threshold of the inner room, he bows and enters the

sanctum sanctorum. Inside, if the dairy is a *kog-folly*, he salutes the *monny* or, if it has been lost, the place where this sacred object used to hang, by raising his right hand vertically to his forehead. He bows before the *er-tat*-grade equipment and then the *po-tat*-grade utensils and finally touches an *er-tat* vessel and then the actual *po-tat* 'churning pot'. He establishes himself as a fully-qualified dairyman-priest with this last act. He rekindles the fire in the inner room, making it by friction if necessary, and goes out to milk the buffaloes for the dairy.

The overall intention of these rites is clear, while meanings of many details are obscure. The aim is to raise a man of the impure secular world to a state of ritual purity sufficient for him to enter the pure and sacred realm of the dairy, principally by requiring that he drink, as well as wash himself with water from a sacred source; and then to bring him, stage by stage, into contact with the sacred objects with which he will be associated during his period of priesthood. But why *mülly* leaves, and why seven? Why throw the leaves over his head and put shoots in his hair? Why the ritual sweeping at the dairy threshold? For the Todas themselves, these ritual details are of extreme importance and failure to adhere to them is thought to nullify the efficacy of the rite in question. But they care little, if at all, about exegesis.

Once a man has achieved, through ritual, a degree of purity sufficient for him to operate the *polly*, he must carefully order his daily life so as not to diminish that purity. He must not visit impure places, attend ceremonies that will contaminate him, or consume impure foods and drink. He also may not visit the Nilgiri bazaars, where he would have close contact with impure people and things. On the other hand, he is free to visit the domestic area of his own and the other Toda settlements, but not on the weekly *mod-nol* or sacred 'village day',⁴³ observed by the hamlet where his dairy is located. And, except on such days, the *polly kartpolkh* may sleep with a woman. However, whenever the dairyman enters a domestic dwelling, he must rigorously avoid touching any part of it but the floor and the sleeping platform. Contact with anything else in the house

⁴³ See Walker (1986:158-9) for the significance of the day.

immediately reduces the dairyman's ritual status to that of *per-olkh* 'ordinary man'.

In terms of ceremonies, on no account may the *polly-kartpolkh* attend a funeral or rites associated with a woman's pregnancy and childbearing. He is free to attend other, less polluting, rituals, but will not eat the food served on such occasions. So far as his food and drink are concerned, he must cook his own meals in the inner room of the dairy and consume them in the outer room. He may eat only pure foods: milk, milk products, and his staple grain (now rice, formerly millet). Salt and *jiggery* 'crude sugar' are the only additives allowed in the inner room of the dairy, but he may keep chilies in the outer room and add them after he has brought his food to that less sacred part of the building. He must obtain all his water from the dairy stream; on no condition may he have any contact with the domestic water supply. He is strictly prohibited from using coffee, alcohol, opium, tobacco, or other stimulants.

A dairyman infringing on any of these rules immediately reverts to the status of *per-olkh* and may resume his priestly duties only after repeating the ordination rituals. Should he be polluted by attending a funeral, pregnancy, or childbirth ceremony, he incurs special pollution – just like any other Toda – which lasts until the next moon; only then does he regain sufficient ritual purity to enable him to repeat the ordination rites. It is by purposely infringing one of these rules – most commonly by touching the domestic water supply – that a man who so wishes terminates his period of services as dairyman-priest.

When the *polly-kartpolkh* is engaged in the ritual work of dairying, he wears his black loincloth (*tüny*) and, especially in the morning chill, may don a second black cloth as a shawl. He must also wear the traditional undergarment of the Toda male, the breechclout and waist-string; on no account may he enter the dairy wearing modern undershorts. At other times he wears ordinary Toda garments, leaving his priestly attire inside the dairy.

Torthash Sub-caste's *Tor-folly*

In the majority of hamlets of Torthash sub-caste, the lowest grade of dairy-temple is the *tor-folly* ('the dairy [*folly=polly*] of the Tor[thash] people'). The dairyman/ boy who serves a *tor-folly* is called a *tor-folly kartpolkh/ mokh*. He must belong to Torthash sub-caste and usually is a member of the clan that owns the dairy that he serves.

The rites of ordination, as also the rules of conduct for the officiating dairyman, are almost identical to those of the Töwfilly *polly*.⁴⁴ Significantly, however, *tor-folly* dairymen do not don a black loincloth when engaged in ritual activity, but instead wear a regular white loincloth. This, together with the fact that no *tor-folly* has or had a *monny*, suggests that Torthash's lowest-ranking dairy-temples are less sacred than their Töwfilly equivalents, the *polly*, as indicated in the table above.

The buffaloes associated with the *tor-folly* are the least sacred of the temple animals owned by the Torthash sub-caste. They are divided into two named categories of identical sanctity. Six Torthash patrilineal clans are traditional owners of buffaloes called *noshpep-ir*, while five others have animals called *penep-ir*. But because buffaloes, both domestic and temple, are frequently exchanged between clans as gifts and in payment of fines, most Torthash clans own temple buffaloes originating from other clans, in addition to the grades of animal proper to them. For example, a particular *tor-folly* dairy may have *noshpep-ir*, *penep-ir*, and *post-ir* from Melgaash and the Töwfilly patrilineal clans associated with it. But in a temple herd of mixed grade, the grade of buffalo traditionally associated with the owning patrilineal clan is regarded by that clan as most sacred and is believed to have originally been given to them by Goddess Tökishy. Moreover, only the grade of buffalo traditionally owned by the clan may be sacrificed at clansmen's funerals.

⁴⁴ One may seldom write of 'identical' rites among Todas, due to the many small variations of custom from clan to clan, hamlet to hamlet, and even dairy to dairy. This cautions against too hastily criticizing other researchers' descriptions, which may reflect such ritual variation.

Melgaash Clan's *Polly*

Melgaash patriclan, belonging to the Torthash sub-caste, shares many social and ritual features with the Töwfilly people.⁴⁵ Its anomalous status with respect to the community's social organization is also reflected in its dairy organization. Melgaash dairies are all of the same grade, are known as *polly*, and the dairymen who operate them are called *polly kartpolkh/ molk* – just like those of the Töwfilly patriclans. Only Melgaash clansmen may serve in Melgaash dairy – temples. They wear the black loincloth or *tüny* as do Töwfilly priests.

The single grade of temple buffalo owned by Melgaash patriclan corresponds in rank, Todas say, to the Töwfilly *post-ir* and to the *noshpep-ir* and *penep-ir* of the other Torthash patriclans. Melgaash's temple buffaloes have their own name, *peshoshir*.

The *Kur-polly* of Some Torthash Clans

Two (previously three) Torthash patriclans traditionally own dairies higher in sanctity than the *tor-folly* described above. These dairies are called *kur-polly* (the etymology of *kur* is obscure). The man who operates a *kur-polly* is called a *kur-polly kartpolkh/ mokh* and is usually from Torthash sub-caste; a Töwfilly man may also perform this task should he also operate the *wisolly* dairy (see below) in a hamlet that has both grades of sacred dairy-temple. Ordination rites for a *kur-polly kartpolkh/ mokh* are identical to those for the man who is to operate a *tor-folly*.

Like Töwfilly's *kog-folly* vis-à-vis their *kid-folly*, Torthash's *kur-polly* dairies owe their higher sanctity vis-à-vis the sub-caste's *tor-folly* to the presence, or former presence, in these buildings of a sacred *monny*. But in contrast to the Töwfilly *polly*, where the possession of a *monny* raises the sanctity but not the grade of the dairy, the ownership by *kur-polly* of *monny* raises both sanctity and grade.

Because the *kur-polly* possess, or once possessed, *monny*, the incumbent dairyman-priest must perform the rite of 'feeding the

⁴⁵ See Walker (1986:70, 70-71 n.13, 72, 134-35).

monny', as described for a Töwfilly *kog-folly*. Special precautions must also be taken to preserve the purity of the *kur-polly's* churning pot, including, most importantly, the use of the bark from the Hill Mango tree (*Meliosma pungens*). Todas call this bark *tehr* and regard it as a particularly potent ritual purifier. Every time the dairyman is about to pour buttermilk from the *po-tat* in which it was churned into less-sacred *er-tat*-grade storage vessels, he taps the side of the churning vessel three times with a piece of *Meliosma* bark while uttering the sacred syllable *awn* to prevent the churning pot from being defiled by its proximity to an *er-tat*-grade vessel.

The need for an officiating *kur-polly kartpolkh/ mokh* to safeguard more rigorously his, and the dairy's, ritual purity is seen in the regulations governing his liaison with women, as well as in how he takes his food. He is permitted sexual intercourse only three times a week, and not at all with Töwfilly women.⁴⁶ When a *kur-polly kartpolkh/ mokh* eats, he must hold his leaf plate in his hands until he finishes; on no condition may he put it on the ground, as is permissible at lower-grade dairies.

When engaged in his dairy work, the *kur-polly kartpolkh/ mokh* wears a dairyman's black loincloth, again signifying his dairy's superior status vis-à-vis the *tor-folly*.

The temple buffaloes associated with the *kur-polly* differ according to the owning patriclan. One of the two extant owning patriclans has a special grade of temple buffalo called *mort-ir*,⁴⁷ which is of higher sanctity than the temple herds associated with the Töwfilly and Melgaash *polly*, or with the Torthash *Tor-folly*. While any Toda male may drink the milk of the lower-grade temple buffaloes, nobody may consume the unprocessed milk of a *mort-ir*. The second *kur-polly*-owning patriclan, on the other hand, has no special grade of buffalo associated with its dairies of this grade. The animals tended by the *kur-polly* dairyman at this clan are *noshpep-ir*, the same as at the clan's *tor-folly*-grade dairies.

⁴⁶ From this and other rules it is evident that Töwfilly women are viewed as a greater threat to ritual purity than Torthash women.

⁴⁷ According to Emeneau (1971:xlII), *mort-ir* means, "the buffaloes of the *mod*," i.e., 'clan', but my principal informant from Kaash patriclan said this was incorrect, but could offer no other meaning for the buffalo grade name.

Torthash Sub-caste's *Wish-olly*

Seven of the ten extant Torthash patriclans are the traditional owners of dairies ranking higher than any of those hitherto discussed. These are the *wish-olly* (from *wish* [etymology obscure] + [p]olly). Most *wish-olly* have only one room, probably because the higher sanctity of these dairies prohibits the dairyman from sleeping, eating, or keeping his secular equipment in them, hence there is no real need for a second room.⁴⁸ There are, however, three particularly sacred two-roomed *wish-olly*. One of these is of exceptional sanctity due to its conical shape, which makes it a *poh*, one of only two extant dairy-temple structures of its kind (see below for the second).

The daily procedures at the *wish-olly* are much the same as those already described for the *kur-polly*, but with a few notable differences. One, doubtless because the dairyman does not sleep in this grade of dairy, is that he must ceremonially enter it, bow, and touch the dairy vessels and salute the *monny*, or *monny*-place if the sacred object has been lost, in the morning and evening. Another is the special manner in which this dairyman drinks his buttermilk. At lower-grade dairies he imbibes directly from a bamboo container, but at the *wish-olly* he must first pour the buttermilk into a leaf cup. At the three most sacred two-roomed *wish-olly*, the dairyman must always face the *po-tat* shelf at the back of the inner room and must never turn his back on the *po-tat*-grade vessels, whether entering or leaving the building, or working inside it.

The dairyman serving at a *wish-olly* is known as a *wish-olkh*⁴⁹ and may not be recruited from either the owning patriclan or, for the most part, the same sub-caste. This rule alone sets the *wish-olly* apart from all other grades of dairy thus far discussed and highlights an important inter-sub-caste relationship among the Todas, namely, that the Torthash sub-caste owns the community's more sacred dairies but only the other – Töwfilly – usually operates these high-grade institutions. There is one exception to the rule that the *wish-olkh* must be a Töwfilly man: he may come from the Melgaash

⁴⁸ Rivers (1906:73).

⁴⁹ The form *wish-mokh* seems never to be used, although youths may also serve in this grade of dairy.

patriclan of Torthash sub-caste.⁵⁰ But Melgaash *wish-olkh*, in some respects, are ritually inferior to those from Töwfilly patriclans, particularly in that they may not perform the traditional duties of a *wish-olkh* at a funeral ceremony.⁵¹

The rites that elevate an ordinary man or youth to the position of *wish-olkh* require that he first achieve the ritual status of a *tor-folly kartpolkh*, the lowest rank of Torthash dairyman. The ordination process requires a full two days for one about to become a *wish-olkh* for the first time, whereas a subsequent elevation to office can be accomplished in a single day. The two-day initiation begins early in the morning, when the candidate goes to the lower-grade dairy of the hamlet where he is to serve as *wish-olkh*. He receives his morning meal from the officiating dairyman and eats it seated on the raised platform outside the front wall of the dairy. He must stay near this dairy until evening.

The rites that elevate the *wish-olkh*-elect to the rank of *tor-folly kartpolkh* begin after the officiating lower-grade dairyman has completed his evening work. First, a man of ordinary ritual status (*per-olkh*) from the hamlet brings a dairyman's black loincloth to the dairy and gives it to the officiating dairyman, who stands in front of the entrance to his dairy with the candidate facing him. Three times the *wish-olkh*-elect asks, "Shall I don the *tüny*?" and each time the dairyman replies, "Put it on!" After raising the loincloth to his forehead, the candidate ties it around his waist while removing his ordinary white garment. Proceeding to the dairy stream, the *wish-olkh*-elect performs the ordination rites for a *tor-folly kartpolkh*, which are identical to those described above for a *polly kartpolkh*.

When the *wish-olkh*-elect has completed the rites that raise him to the status of *tor-folly kartpolkh*, he returns to the lower-grade dairy and stations himself outside the surrounding wall. Meanwhile, the officiating dairyman lights a fire of *mülly* wood with a firebrand from his dairy fire. The candidate ritually warms himself at this fire

⁵⁰ This is another aspect of Melgaash patriclan's peculiar ritual position that appears to ally it with the Töwfilly sub-caste rather than to the Torthash-olkh to which it belongs.

⁵¹ For which, see Rivers (1906:354, 370, 375, 376, 389, 401) and Walker (1986:217,235).

before going to a nearby *shola* (Nilgiri copse) to strip some bark and pluck seven leaves from the *tehr* tree. He performs the ritual drinking again, this time using the *tehr* leaves and bark instead of the *mülly* leaves and shoots used by lower-grade candidates. Having completed this ritual drinking, the candidate returns to the forest, collects more *tehr* bark and leaves, and returns to the dairy stream to perform the ritual drinking a second time.

After repeating the drinking with *tehr* bark and leaves a third time, he proceeds to a spot in the woods near the dairy stream that is called *Tofehr-polly*, translated by Chhabra (see below) as 'the dairy of shrubs' – presumably a Toda euphemism for this sacred place in the wilds. Here he is joined by the lower-grade dairyman, who gives him buttermilk to drink in a highly ritualistic manner. The dairyman gives the candidate two *kokud* (*Mappia foetida*) leaves, keeping two more for himself. Each man folds his leaves into a cup. Holding a bamboo vessel containing buttermilk between his knees, the dairyman tilts this so as to pour some of the liquid into the leaf cup that he holds in both hands. He pours buttermilk from this leaf into the candidate's leaf cup from which the latter drinks. The procedure is repeated until the candidate feels he has drunk a sufficient amount. Next, and for utilitarian purposes this time, the officiating dairyman builds a fire in the forest, lighting it with firebrands from his dairy. He fetches food that he has prepared in the dairy and serves this to the candidate. Both dairyman and candidate must spend the night in the forest.

The following morning the candidate collects more *tehr* bark and leaves, returns to the dairy stream, and again drinks from seven leaves in the ritual manner of the previous evening. This time, however, he repeats the sequence five times rather than three. He next returns to the forest, where he receives buttermilk from the lower-grade dairyman followed by a meal, as on the previous evening. He may not leave the *shola* during the day. He goes to the dairy stream in the evening and repeats the sequence of ritual drinking seven times before returning to the forest to receive, as before, buttermilk and a meal. Both the lower-grade dairyman and the candidate again sleep in the *shola*.

The next morning, the third after the candidate left the hamlet's domestic area, he performs the ritual drinking nine times,

thus requiring sixty-three *tehr* leaves, and then he bathes from head to foot in the dairy stream. He now proceeds to the lower-grade dairy where the dairyman has prepared a belt of jungle creeper, which the candidate ties around his waist. The dairyman has also dug up his dairy's special *muu*, which he has placed outside the dairy wall, together with a few strands of *kakarkh* grass. The candidate uses the grass to ritually sweep the ground in front of the *muu*. He then bows to the sacred vessel, touching his forehead to it before returning it to the lower-grade dairyman. The candidate has now achieved the ritual status of full *wish-olkh*. He enters the lower-grade dairy in the ritual manner described earlier, touching the two categories of dairy equipment, and for the first time goes to his own *wish-olly*. Having ritually entered this dairy, he lights the dairy's fire, cleans the vessels, and goes out to milk the buffaloes in his charge. After milking, he returns to the lower-grade dairy where he receives food from the dairyman.

The rites are slightly curtailed for the ordination of a man who has previously served as a *wish-olkh*. He need only spend one night in the forest and he performs the ritual drinking twice rather than four times, going through the sequence five times on the first evening and seven times on the following morning.⁵²

While engaged in the work of his dairy, the *wish-olkh* must wear a black *tüny*. He may wear an ordinary cloak that he keeps in the lower-grade dairy when he is not working in the dairy or milking the buffaloes, but the cloak must be worn in a way peculiar to a man of his office, wrapping it so that the front of his body remains uncovered. The *wish-olkh* must also always wear earrings.

The rules that a *wish-olkh* must observe to guard his and his dairy's ritual purity are generally more rigorous than those for the dairyman at a *polly*, *tor-folly*, or *kur-polly*. He may neither cook nor eat in the *wish-olly*; rather the lower-grade dairyman prepares the *wish-olkh*'s food, serving it to him in the lower-grade dairy. Nor may a *wish-olkh* sleep in his own dairy, but must pass the night in the lower-grade dairy of the hamlet, where he occupies the superior bed, while the lower-ranking dairyman takes the inferior one. He is

⁵² Rivers' (1906:147-50) account of a *wish-olkh*'s ordination describes this truncated ceremony rather than the full sequence required for an initiate.

permitted to visit any hamlet of Torthash sub-caste, but never a settlement belonging to his own Töwfilly people. Two nights a week he may sleep with a woman, but she cannot be of his own sub-caste (unless he is a Melgaash clansman) because Töwfilly women are considered more polluting than those of Torthash sub-caste. The broom, pestle, and winnowing basket must have been removed, as must be done for other dairymen, before a *wish-olkh* enters a domestic residence. The *wish-olkh* must bathe from head to foot in the dairy stream downstream from where he takes water for the dairy before entering his dairy on the morning after he has had sexual relations.

The grade of temple buffaloes associated with the *wish-olly* are known as *wish-olly-ir*. Lower-grade animals, with the exception of Kaash patriclan's *mort-ir*, may also be milked for a *wish-olly*-grade dairy. We may thus find as many as six different kinds of temple buffalo tended at this grade of dairy: *wish-olly-ir*, *noshpep-ir*, *penep-ir*, *peshosh-ir*, *post-ir*, and *pity-ir*. The milk drawn at a *wish-olly* may be drunk only by the officiating dairyman; the buttermilk, on the other hand, may be distributed to the womenfolk, in the same manner as already described for the lower-grade dairies. The ghee, as usual, may be sold to outsiders with the profits shared by the owners of the animals milked for the *wish-olly*.

Kerrir Clan's *Poh*

One Torthash patriclan, Kerrir, owns a dairy that according to the most recent field research by Ootacamund-based Tarun Chhabra,⁵³ belongs to a grade all of its own.⁵⁴ This is the *poh* 'conical dairy' at Konawsh, which is named after the younger sister of Goddess

⁵³ See Walker (2006) for an account of Chhabra's commitment to Toda cultural heritage.

⁵⁴ This and other observations on the Konawsh foh attributed to Tarun Chhabra are from his still-to-be published paper 'A Migration to Konawsh' (2012), scheduled to be Chapter Seven of his forthcoming book containing a collection of essays on the Todas and related subjects. Pagination currently unavailable.

Tökishy. All Todas regard this dairy complex as being of exceptional sanctity.

Toda informants have told previous ethnographers, e.g. Emeneau⁵⁵ and me,⁵⁶ that the Konawsh-foh (*foh* from *poh*), although of great sanctity, is nonetheless of *kur-polly* grade. If Chhabra is correct when he writes that it is, "well known to Todas," that the conical dairy at Konawsh, "belongs to a unique grade," then his research also suggests a reason why earlier informants may have identified the Konawsh-foh as a *kur-polly*. Chhabra (2012) writes:

Until a few centuries ago there were two grades of dairy-temple existing at Konawsh. Besides the conical *poh*, there was a barrel-vaulted... [*kur-polly*] located nearby... [that] had to be abandoned when it ran-out of... [its] associated buffaloes...

The *poh* at Konawsh, like the *tee* dairies of old, but unlike the *wish-olly*-grade *poh* already mentioned, is located well away from domestic settlements and is architecturally unique in that it is surrounded by two stonewalls rather than one. Also, although several conical and barrel-vaulted dairy-temples in the past have been identified as *poh*, Chhabra writes that it is only the dairyman-priest at the Konawsh-foh who is designated as *poh-kartpolkh* 'the man who milks at the *poh*'.

Chhabra (2012) maintains that, "the number of rituals unique to the... [Konawsh-foh] ensures that this institution is placed in a category of its own." He also writes that, "many of the these rituals appear to be allied with those that were performed at the highest grade *tee* institution and those that are still executed at the very sacred ... [Tawrradr Clan *kog-folly* dairies]."

The *poh-kartpolkh* must be a member of the owning patriclan, in his late teens or older, have had his ears ritually pierced, and previously served as dairyman-priest in a *Tor-folly*-grade dairy. Because he would otherwise be alone at this isolated settlement, he is permitted to have a single companion with him, an unordained man or youth.

⁵⁵ Emeneau (1974:64).

⁵⁶ Walker (1986:136).

It is evident that Todas regard this dairy-temple as one of exceptional sanctity from the extreme precautions taken to protect the purity of the *Konawsh-foh* and its contents, as well as the person of the dairyman-priest who serves it. Toda laymen may not approach the *poh* except in a state of high ritual purity. On the eve of a layman's intended visit, he must clean his house by smearing a paste of buffalo dung on the walls, floor, and sleeping platform; he must remove the emblems of womanhood – broom, pestle, and winnowing tray – from the building; and he must avoid sexual intercourse. On his way to the *poh*, the visitor must bathe in a stream (not the sacred stream of the dairy) that flows nearby this exceptionally sacred place.

The dairyman and his lay companion may not sleep in the dairy, but must spend their nights in a nearby hut that Todas euphemistically call *kortash*, their usual word for a calf-shed. Chhabra describes these quarters as comprising "a very basic lean-to structure – open in the front – that does not afford much protection from the elements." The two sleeping platforms, he writes, are set about a meter or more apart and at right angles one to the other so that the hut is L-shaped. This sleeping layout, Chhabra (2012) tells us, ensures that, "the two men are never in physical contact," to avoid immediately defiling the dairyman-priest. The 'calf-shed' does have a fireplace in front, with the fire compulsorily lit with an ember from the fireplace inside the *poh* itself.

The dairyman prepares food for himself and his companion inside the *poh*, but neither of them may eat there. The dairyman takes his food, Chhabra says, seated, naked except for his breechclout, "under a tree." In contrast, I was told that he sat on the outer surrounding wall of the dairy. He must take care never to put his hand to his lips; instead he squeezes his food into balls, and tosses them into his mouth. Similarly, when he drinks water or buttermilk, he must pour it from a leaf directly into his mouth, without the leaf touching his lips. The lay companion may eat and drink in the normal way inside the sleeping hut.

The *poh-kartpolkh* must remain celibate throughout the period of his priesthood; indeed, he may not even talk to women. When he does speak to anybody, according to Chhabra, he must do so

exclusively in the Toda language.⁵⁷ His lay companion, on the other hand, is permitted, except on three particular days,⁵⁸ to visit his home hamlet. Here he may indulge in sexual intercourse but, if he does, he must wait a day, presumably for the impurity to wear off, and must bathe in the stream near Konawsh on his way back to the *poh*.

Just as the precautions taken to guard the purity of the *poh* at Konawsh are more stringent than those for lower-grade dairies, so the ritual that elevates the dairyman to office is more elaborate. In order to not overburden the reader with a mass of ritual minutiae, only an overview is presented here.⁵⁹

On the night before ordination, the dairyman-elect and his lay companion must sleep in the open, in a *shola* near Kerrir, the head hamlet of the owning patrician.⁶⁰ Chhabra (2012) records the name of the place as *tofehr-polly*, "the dairy of shrubs," the same term, as already noted, which is used at *wish-olly*-grade dairies.

The next morning, the *poh-kartpolkh*-elect walks along a specially-designated path from which he must never deviate, to the ordination stream. He removes his ordinary cloak and loincloth, but not his breechclout, upon reaching his destination. Following Chhabra's (2012) description, he rubs dried buffalo dung, which is a purification agent also applied to homes and dairy-temples, over his body, then scoops up water from the dairy stream with *tehr* bark, and employs both hands to rub down his entire body with this sacred dairy stream water.

The priestly candidate now dons two items of dress and accouterments that are provided for him by Kerrir clansmen. One is a new breechclout, while the other is a sacred accouterment unique to

⁵⁷ All Toda men are conversant with Tamil; most also speak Badagu and some speak such other south Indian languages as Kannada and Malayalam; an increasing number also speak some English.

⁵⁸ These are the days sacred to Konawsh itself and to the clan's nearby Kashwī and Kerir hamlets.

⁵⁹ Chhabra's forthcoming chapter 'A Migration to Konawsh' offers a full account in which certain ritual details differ from those previously reported by Rivers (1906:79-81), and Walker (1986:135-39). It is not currently possible to conclude if earlier accounts are faulty, or whether Chhabra has recorded ritual variants and/ or innovations.

⁶⁰ Chhabra does not mention the dairyman-elect's lay companion also sleeping here.

the *poh* at Konawsh, namely the *kupy*. Chhabra describes this as manufactured from:

several strands of thread... taken from the black... [loincloths] worn by many categories of dairyman priest. The threads are braided together to make a band, which is then knotted at one end. When nine such bands have been produced they are bound together, with the knotted ends... hanging downwards.

The *poh-kartpolkh* suspends this *kupy* from his breechclout which, as Chhabra writes, "functions to ensure the priest's sanctity at all times." Consequently, "although other items of priestly attire are sometimes removed during the course of temple work, ... [the *poh-kartpolkh*] never removes his breechclout with *kupy* attached."

The *pohkartpolkh*-elect is now ready to begin the ordination rites proper. He first obtains purificatory *tehr* bark from a particular *Meliosma* tree in the vicinity of the dairy stream. At Konawsh, instead of the seven *mülly* leaves that are gathered by priestly candidates at other grades of dairy, the dairyman-priest-elect must search for seven leaves, each one plucked from a different species of thorny plant. Additionally, the candidate takes another seven leaves from one particular species among the stipulated seven. Proceeding to the ordination place, the dairyman-elect throws a piece of *tehr* bark into the stream three times, each time uttering the sacred syllable, "*awn*." This ritual act is known as "purifying the big [= dairy] stream." The candidate next performs the ritual drinking common to ordination rites at all dairy grades, but with some elaborations at Konawsh.

The candidate, having raised himself to a level of ritual purity sufficient for him to assume the office of *poh-kartpolkh*, may now don the other items symbolizing his high priestly office – a dairyman-priest's black loincloth, a rattan finger ring, and a priestly cord that is made by twisting together threads from a dairyman's black loincloth and long strips of the stem of a de-thorned *Girardinia heterophylla* creeper, which the *poh-kartpolkh* hangs over his right shoulder. The candidate has now achieved the ritual purity required of him to begin his dairying duties. He proceeds to the *poh*, bows at the threshold, enters, and generally follows the same series of acts as described for

the lower-grade dairies. There are certain ritual elaborations, most notable of which is the stipulation, as at a *wish-olly*-grade dairy, that he may never turn his back on the most sacred *po-tat* equipment, consequently, he steps backwards when leaving the dairy's inner sanctum.

A legend says that the people of Kerrir patriclan once borrowed buffaloes of the *mort-ir* grade to milk at their sacred *poh* dairy-temple at Konawsh. But at least since River's time,⁶¹ the only animals tended there have been Kerrir patriclan's *noshpep-ir* (the same grade that they tend at their *tor-folly* dairies) along with a few domestic *pity-ir*. Neither the *poh-kartpolkh* nor anyone else may drink the milk drawn from *noshpep-ir* tended at this *poh*. Should the dairyman wish to add unprocessed milk to his diet, he must draw that milk from the domestic *pity-ir* in his care and keep it apart from the milk he has drawn from the temple animals. If milk of the *pity-ir* is mixed with temple buffaloes' milk, it is not deemed to pollute the latter but rather to attain to its level of sanctity. Buttermilk from the *poh* at Konawsh is not distributed as at lower-grade dairies; men who visit the *poh* may drink it, but it is given to women only on the day when the temple is closed and the dairy rituals terminated until the following year. On this occasion, when returning to Kerrir clan's sole remaining hamlet, the dairyman-priest's assistant takes along buttermilk produced in the *poh* to be distributed among the women of the clan. The ghee, as usual, has no sanctity and may be used in the hamlets or sold to outsiders.

Tawrrawdr Clan's *Kog-folly*

Of the Torthash patriclans, Tawrrawdr is the sole owner of a special grade of dairy, the *kog-folly*. The name and its literal meaning, *viz.* 'big dairy', are identical to the more sacred of Töwfilly sub-caste's *polly*-grade temples. But Tawrrawdr's *kog-folly* are very different. All Todas (with the exception, perhaps, of the Kerrir people) regard this grade of dairy-temple as more sacred than any thus far mentioned,

⁶¹ Rivers (1906:79).

while Tawrrawdr clansmen believe their *kog-folly* are *tee-dairy* substitutes. The *kog-folly* at Tawrrawdr, the clan's chief hamlet, is a two-roomed building; all others are single-roomed structures like most *wish-olly*.

Tawrrawdr *kog-follys'* high level of sanctity entails more elaborate ritual and more stringent rules to protect their purity than we have yet seen, with the possible exception of those required at the Konawsh *poh* dairy. As at the three most sacred of the *wish-olly* and at the Konawsh-foh, the dairyman serving a *kog-folly* must never turn his back on the *po-tat* equipment. Moreover, in the *kog-folly*, as at the Konawsh-foh, there must be a total separation of the *po-tat* and *er-tat* grades of dairying equipment. An intermediary bamboo vessel must be employed at a *kog-folly* when transferring milk products from *po-tat* to *er-tat* vessels.

The *kog-folly kartpolkh/ mokh* must be recruited from the owning patriclan.⁶² The rites that elevate him to office are similar to those for the *poh-kartpolkh* at Konawsh. The *kog-folly* dairyman wears a black loincloth while performing his dairy duties, which follow the same general pattern as at other dairies. He wears an ordinary cloak when off-duty. He may sleep in the outer room and keep his secular clothing there at the two-roomed dairy. However, when a one-roomed *kog-folly* is being operated, the dairyman must sleep in a 'calf-shed' that is actually a special priest's sleeping hut, as at Konawsh. In the morning, the dairyman-priest proceeds to his dairy wearing only a breechelout. An officiating *kog-folly kartpolkh/ mokh* is prohibited from entering the domestic area of the hamlet and, like the Konawsh *poh-kartpolkh*, must observe strict celibacy.

The rule was different in the past when a dairyman who had completed a year's service at a *kog-folly* was permitted to visit an ordinary dwelling and have intercourse with a woman there. In addition to the ordinary ritual precautions taken by lesser-grade priests that it not be a clan or a settlement day and that the symbols of womanhood be removed from the house, the *kog-folly kartpolkh* observed special restrictions in order to not lose his priestly office. He had to lie on his right side when engaged in intercourse and refrain

⁶² Rivers (1906:76-77) wrote that the dairyman could be from any Torthash patriclan, which my information contradicts.

from touching the woman with his right hand, the purer of the two; nor could she touch him with her impure left hand. Furthermore, on his return to his dairy next morning, the dairyman had to sit down three times at the places where the soil had been disturbed by moles (a stipulation my informants were unable to explain) and then to bathe at the dairy stream and put *müilly* leaves in his hair. He was prohibited from saluting the *monny* when entering the dairy on this occasion. Finally, like the dairyman-priest at the Konawsh-foh, the *kog-folly kartpolkh/ mokh* could not drink in the ordinary way but had to follow a procedure intended to protect his purity. He poured buttermilk from a bamboo vessel of *er-tat* grade into a leaf cup while seated on the raised platform outside his dairy; on no account could he drink the buttermilk inside the building. He drank three times from the cup, each time raising it to his forehead and uttering the sacred syllable, "*awn*," before drinking.

The buffaloes associated with the *kog-folly* are called *kog-folly-ir* and constitute a herd of exceptional importance. Animals of lower grades may be individually owned, but Tawrrawdr's *kog-folly-ir* are the common property of the patrician as a whole. Each clan *polm* takes charge of the herd for a period of two years (formerly it was three) and reaps the profits from it. It is noteworthy also that a *kog-folly* buffalo may never be sacrificed at a funeral.

All grades of buffalo except *wish-olly-ir* and *mot-ir* (the reasons for these exceptions is unclear) may be tended at the *kog-folly* and buttermilk may be distributed in the usual manner. But nobody, including the officiating dairyman, may drink the unprocessed milk drawn for this grade of dairy. On the occasion when a buffalo is named, however, rice may be boiled in the milk and served to male visitors.

Tawrrawdr's *kog-folly*, of all the hamlet dairies, are the closest in ritual practice to the most sacred of all Toda dairy institutions, the *tee*. Rivers (1906:76) was clearly right in suggesting that the *kog-folly* institution, "is in many ways intermediate between the dairies of the village and... the *tee*" and he noted several ritual similarities between the two institutions. An even clearer indication of the relationship between *kog-folly* and *tee* that Rivers missed but Emeneau's linguistic studies have revealed, is that the two types of dairy share a

common vocabulary to describe, "the practices of the dairy and all its accompanying operations and objects" (Emeneau 1974:7).

CONCLUSION

Understanding Toda society and culture requires a knowledge of economic and ritual dimensions of Toda pastoralism. The ritual dimension establishes Todas as unique among India's multitude of ethnicities, and indeed unique among pastoral peoples the world over. Two observations are of note in discussing the ideological and ritual bases of Toda religion. The first is that the Todas' sacred dairy cult far exceeds in importance their theology of anthropomorphic deities. There are Toda deities in abundance, the most important being Goddess Tökishy who, Todas believe created their buffaloes and the sacred dairy institutions associated with them. Generically these deities are known as *töw-tht* 'gods of the mountains', though some are associated with rivers. For the most part, however, these anthropomorphic divinities pale in significance when compared to the *töw-nor*, 'gods of the places' (meaning 'gods of the most sacred dairy places'). Not all Toda dairies fall into the *töw-nor* category; only those isolated from domestic settlements, such as the *poh* at Konawsh, and those located in hamlets that Todas call *itwüd* 'important' or 'principal' settlements, which they believe were created by the 'gods of the mountains'.⁶³ Such sacred sites are infused with divinity, conceived mostly as a diffused force. There are times, however, when they too, like the gods of the mountains, are spoken of in anthropomorphic terms. Thus Todas sometimes talk or sing of the *töw-nor* 'becoming angry' or 'attending the council of the gods'.⁶⁴

⁶³ Less important hamlets, said to have been human-, not god-created, are called *makhmod* or 'inferior settlements'. Todas say these human-created *makhmod* have been established at times when herds at the principal hamlets became too large to be tended there. *Makhmod* dairies are ritually inferior to those of an *itwüd-mod*. Dairymen-priests are not inducted directly into them, but are ordained for, and serve for a short time in, a *töw-nor* dairy belonging to the same clan.

⁶⁴ See Emeneau (1971:xli).

The second observation is that the twin concepts of hierarchy and purity dominate all others associated with the Todas' sacred dairy institutions. Every element associated with these institutions is hierarchically graded. The higher the ritual status of an element, the greater must be its ritual purity and the care taken to prevent its pollution. With these concepts, the Toda community demonstrates its participation in and not alienation from the world of pan-Indic Hinduism.

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